



San Diego City Attorney **CASEY GWINN**

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 27, 2002

CONTACT: Maria Velasquez, Press Secretary (619) 235-5725

INVISIBLE VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

First of its kind Conference in San Diego Held by City Attorney's Office

San Diego, CA: They came from all over California to learn more about the invisible victims of domestic violence—individuals with disabilities. Close to 100 people attended the first-ever “Domestic Violence Victims with Disabilities Conference” in the City of San Diego. “This issue is an outgrowth of the women’s movement of the 1960’s,” said San Diego City Attorney Casey Gwinn, who is a nationally recognized speaker on domestic violence intervention and prevention. “We’ve gone from providing safe shelters for victims of domestic violence to enacting tougher laws against abusers. In the last decade, we’ve been able to identify population groups that are vulnerable to domestic violence: teens, undocumented immigrants, gays, lesbians, and now people with disabilities. As a community, we’ve come along way, but we have more work to do to end the violence in every home.”

The goal of the conference was to bring awareness to this overlooked community; provide an opportunity for disability advocates to learn more about domestic violence; domestic violence advocates to learn more about individuals with disabilities; provide an opportunity for the professionals to network; assess the needs for San Diego, in order to build a stronger community response to domestic violence; and lastly for San Diego to identify the missing links and partners that can assist and be a part of the San Diego Family Justice Center, which is scheduled to open by the end of the summer in downtown San Diego. The San Diego Family Justice Center will become America’s most innovative justice center for families of domestic violence.

Experts told the audience that individuals with disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse by their partners

(more)

than other individuals. They are often ignored, isolated, and have little or no education about domestic violence and sexual assaults. Often times they do not know it's a crime. Research by the Colorado Department of Health claims that up to 85% of women with disabilities in their State are victims of domestic violence.

Peg Horan, Coordinator of the "Barrier Free Justice Program" in the Kings County District Attorney's Office in Brooklyn, New York, spoke about sexual assault crimes against people with mental retardation. Horan said, "These kinds of cases are very complicated." She urged professionals in law enforcement and social service work to "know thyself." They should understand their own biases, prejudices and personal values which could cause them to do a poor job when assisting people with disabilities. Professionals should understand that it will take more time to process a criminal case, involving a victim with a disability."

The speakers included Linda Woodbury, Disability Services Coordinator for the City of San Diego; Peg Horan, Coordinator, Barrier Free Justice Program and Craig Esswein, Deputy Bureau Chief, Kings County District Attorney's Office, Brooklyn, NY, "Sexual Assault in the Mentally Retarded/Disabled Development;" Julie Rems-Smario, Executive Director, Deaf Women Against Violence, Hayward, CA, "California Deaf Survivors Advocacy Project;" Renee Sievert, Clinical Education Specialist, United Behavioral Health, San Diego, CA, "Mental Illness and Domestic Violence;" and Cema Mastroleo, Disability Services Educator, SafePlace, Austin, Tx, "Violence, its Prevention and People with Disabilities."

The conference was made possible through a \$45,000 grant from the State of California, Department of Justice, and the Office of the Attorney General. It was sponsored by the San Diego City Attorney's Office and the Statewide California Coalition for Battered Women. The conference was held at the Recital Hall in Balboa Park. Leslie Devaney, Executive Assistant City Attorney in the San Diego City Attorney's Office, moderated the conference. For more information about the City Attorney's Domestic Violence Unit, please visit the following website: SDDVunit.org.

###